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How Has the Council of the European Union Been Studied?

Introduction

Together with the European Parliament the Council of the European Union is the most important legislative body in the European Union. Over the past two decades the number of studies focusing on the Council of the European Union has considerably grown. Simultaneously with the increase in volume the variation in used theoretical approaches, data sources and methodological choices has soared. Hence, it is a good time to take stock of the development in the field of Council studies and try to form some kind of an overview of this burgeoning literature.

In this chapter I present a review of a large set of articles focusing on the activities of the Council over the past twenty years. The aim of the following review is to provide a general picture of the state of the Council studies with the help of an analysis of 123 Council related articles. This set of articles hardly covers the whole field of Council studies but I am confident that the selected articles can offer a reasonably balanced overview of how the Council has been studied.

My review starts with the explanation of how I selected the sample of articles for further study. I proceed then by looking at the most influential articles in the research field with citation analysis. In the following sections I explore what kinds of data Council researchers have used in their studies and what the more specific focus of the articles have been. Finally, in the concluding section I close my review with some suggestions for future Council studies.

Selection of the articles

My sample consists of 123 articles published in English language scientific journals in a 21 year period from 1993 to 2013. In the first stage, I collected articles using Google Scholar searches with several search terms (e.g. "Council of the European Union" or "Council of Ministers"). In the second stage, I used the references contained in the articles identified in the first stage to locate more relevant articles. When making Google Scholar searches, I decided not to limit the starting point of my research period to any particular year. The earliest articles I could find with this method were from 1993. I decided, however, to use 2013 as the end point of my articles searches to save me from continuously updating my database with new articles. Most of the selected

articles were published in journals specialised in political science or European studies, although, when deemed relevant, I included also articles in the neighbouring fields such as economics (Widgrén 1994) and journalism (Laursen 2013).

It was not always easy to decide which articles to include in the database. I used following guidelines when selecting articles. First, the focus of the article should be on the Council. This means, for example, that articles that analysed EU decision-making from a broader perspective, including e.g. both the Parliament and the Commission in the analysis, were left out. Second, the articles should be empirical in the sense that they use some kind of real world observations (quantitative, qualitative or other) in the analysis. Nevertheless, I included also review articles in which the existing state of empirical Council research was evaluated because they are an important sign of self-reflection in the research field. The first two exclusion criteria are a clear limitation of my analysis, but I had to draw a line somewhere.[20] Third, I was not interested in case studies that focused on some particular Council decisions, e.g. studies tracing how a specific directive came to be approved by the Council unless these studies had a distinct contribution to the general Council literature. And fourth, there are several articles studying how particular Council presidencies succeeded in realising their goals during their presidency. These were excluded from the database as they mostly discussed current events topical in the EU at the time with little theoretical or methodological contribution to the wider scientific discussion.

Focusing on articles means that monographs or edited volumes are left out of the empirical analysis. This is, of course, a major shortage but I consciously decided to concentrate on journal articles. The sample with 123 articles hardly covers all Council related articles, even within the limitations described above. I acknowledge that my personal preferences may have affected the result to some extent. Given my own history in Council studies I may have (unconsciously) selected certain types of articles with a higher probability than others. Thus, it is probable that some, possibly even important, articles were left out of the sample. Nevertheless, I believe that the selected articles cover the field relatively well and that they provide a good picture of the state of the Council studies during the past two decades.

In the sample the yearly average number of articles is about 5.7. Throughout the period the number of Council related articles has grown, as depicted in Figure 1. There was a peak in 2004 due to a special issue in *European Union Politics* journal which included several articles included in the data set (Stokman & Thomson 2004). In general, the noticeable upward trend reflects a growing research interest in the Council, although one must keep in mind that during the same period also pressures to publish internationally and the number of scientific journals have grown which may, at least partly, contribute to the rising trend.

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[20] These two restrictions lead to an exclusion of a number of influential theoretical articles based on spatial modelling of EU decision-making. These articles typically analyse the EU decision-making as a whole with the Council only as a part in the process which includes also the Commission and the Parliament. The most prominent examples are articles by Garrett & Tsebelis (1996), Tsebelis & Garrett (2000) and Steunenberg (1994). All these three articles would top the citation list in Table 1 with 522, 446 and 284 citations, respectively.
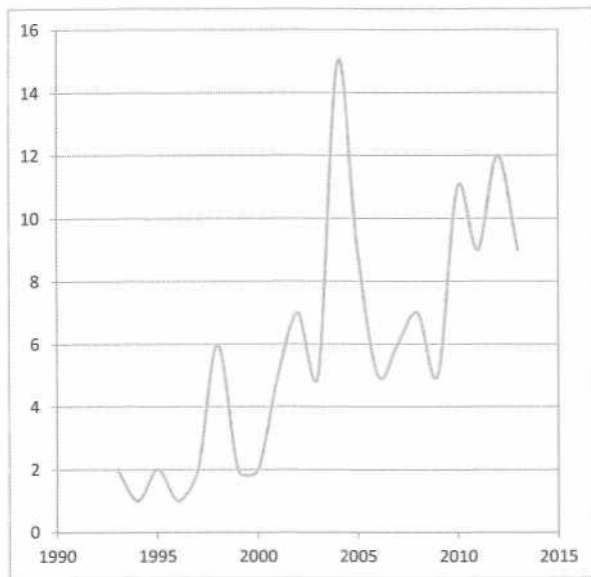
FIGURE 1. *Number of articles by year in the data set.*

The articles were not evenly distributed among various journals. Unsurprisingly, a half of the articles (62) are published in three EU-related journals. *European Union Politics* tops the list with 24 articles, followed closely by *Journal of European Public Policy* (20 articles) and *Journal of Common Market Studies* (18 articles). Most of the rest of the articles are published in general political science journals, of which *European Journal of Political Research* (9 articles) and *West European Politics* (6 articles) are the most popular publishing arenas. The rest are distributed among political science, international relations, economics or general social science journals.

General description and citation analysis

I start the analysis of the selected articles with a brief general description of their substance followed by a simple citation analysis of the most cited articles. Then, later in this chapter, I describe in more detail the types of data used in the articles and the focus of these studies. Word clouds (or text clouds) are a way of visually representing a set of words (Castella & Sutton 2013). Word cloud algorithms create a picture of a given set of words where frequently used words are highlighted by increasing their font size or making them more central in the picture. The aim of word clouds is to summarise a large amount of textual data in a form of an easily and intuitively understandable picture.

Figure 2 shows a word cloud based on the 80 most commonly used words in the abstracts of the Council articles in my data set. The picture is produced by "Wordle" application (available at http://www.wordle.net/). Before entering the abstracts into the application I deleted some commonly used words to make the visual depiction more illustrative of the actual substance of the articles. For example, I deleted terms

"Council of Ministers" or "Council of the European Union" because they were included in practically all abstracts. Furthermore, to make the picture more relevant, I deleted some often-used words that are not helpful in understanding of the research field (e.g. "study" or "data").

FIGURE 2. *Word cloud of the most frequently used words in the article abstracts.*

Most of the words highlighted in Figure 2 are not very surprising. Since the Council is mainly a decision-making body, a majority of the emphasised words are related to this role. Words like "decision-making", "legislative", "bargaining" and "policy" are featured prominently. Also words "voting" and "power", either separately or together, are used frequently in abstracts reflecting, at least partly, the pronounced role of formal voting power analyses in the field.

However, the most interesting feature in Figure 1 is the small role of certain words. First, the words "political" and "politics" are not prominently featured. This may be an indication of how researchers typically see the Council as a supranational body where politics, at least in its more traditional sense, is somehow absent. The Council is conceptualised more as a process where member states with their given preferences and votes decide on current issues than as a political arena where politically elected member state governments fight over the political direction of the EU. Second, and related to the first point, the word "party" is completely missing in the figure. Accordingly, Council decision-making is depicted as a bargaining process between member states whereas in reality the ministers taking part in the process represent domestic political parties with distinct ideological backgrounds.

One way to evaluate a research field is to look at its most influential articles. Although the use of citations as a measure of influence can be questioned, the number of citations is often used to pick out articles with most impact in a specific field of study. I used Google Scholar to calculate the number of citations each of the 123 articles has received. The searches were conducted in March 2014 and the results are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. *Top ten articles with most Google Scholar citations.*

POSITION	AUTHOR	TITLE	CITATIONS
1	Lewis (2005)	The Janus face of Brussels: socialization and everyday decision making in the European Union	257
2	Mattila & Lane (2001)	Why unanimity in the Council? A roll call analysis of Council voting	231
3	Lewis (1998)	Is the 'hard bargaining' image of the Council misleading? The Committee of Permanent Representatives and the local elections directive	229
4	Mattila (2004)	Contested decisions: Empirical analysis of voting in the European Union Council of Ministers	225
5	Felsenthal & Macho-ver (2001)	The Treaty of Nice and qualified majority voting	219
6	Golub (1999)	In the Shadow of the Vote? Decision Making in the European Community	217
7	Widgrén (1994)	Voting power in the EC decision making and the consequences of two different enlargements	212
8	Schmidt (2000)	Only an agenda setter? The European Commission's power over the Council of Ministers	198
9	Heisenberg (2005)	The institution of 'consensus' in the European Union: Formal versus informal decision-making in the Council	195
10	Beyers & Dierickx (1998)	The working groups of the Council of the European Union: supranational or intergovernmental negotiations?	193

The "Top Ten" articles in Table 1 cover quite well the main areas of Council research. Lewis' (1998; 2005) articles at first and third positions analyse everyday decision-making in the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER). He uses qualitative interview data to examine the informal norms and socialisation processes guiding Council decision-making. Mattila and Lane (2001) and Mattila (2004), at positions two and four, analyse quantitatively formal roll call voting at the last stage of the Council decision-making when ministers can cast their votes for or against proposals. Heisenberg's (2005) article in a way combines these two approaches by looking quantitatively at formal Council voting while simultaneously assessing whether the observed voting patterns are more consistent with rationalistic models of decision-making or with the informal norm-guided way of decision-making described in Lewis' articles. She is strongly in favour of the latter view. This conclusion is somewhat

in contrast with Golub's (1999) earlier findings which show that the use of qualified majority voting in the Council increased the speed of EU decision-making even in the late 1970s during the time of the supposed "eurosclerosis".

Felsenthal and Machover's (2001) and Widgrén's (1994) articles in Table 1 represent one strong strand of Council studies: voting power analyses.[21] These studies analyse how the distribution of Council votes combined with the voting rule affect a priori power of member states. These studies are particularly relevant when new voting rules are discussed in the context of treaty changes. The study by Beyers and Dierickx (1998) focuses on the preparatory work taking place in the Council organisation beneath the ministerial level. They analyse the communication networks among civil servants participating in the Council working groups. Finally, Schmidt (2000) examines the complicated interaction patterns between the Council and the Commission and shows how the Commission can sometimes use its competencies to compel the Council into adopting proposals.

Looking only at the total number of citations may overlook important but more recent articles which have not yet had much time to gather citations. Therefore, I also calculated the average number of citations in a year for each article. This changed the top ten list a little by adding the following four articles to the list. Beyers' (2005) article continues his earlier work by studying socialisation and norm adoption among civil servants in Council working groups. Hayes-Renshaw et al. (2006) study Council voting and show that ministers generally accept decisions by consensus, even in those cases where they could use qualified majority voting. These two articles belong to research areas already represented in Table 1. The final two new articles on the top ten list of average annual citations represent two strong Council research topics not yet mentioned. Tallberg (2004) studies the role of the Council presidency in EU's legislative bargaining highlighting the way the presidency can use its information advantage to affect the outcomes of Council negotiations. The article by Zimmer et al. (2005) analyses the political space of Council decision-making, i.e. the general dimensions that define and organize the conflict structure between member states and EU institutions.

Data

As expected, multiple types of data have been used to analyse the Council (Table 2). Over half of the scrutinised studies have used some kind of quantitative data as the primary data source and to illustrate the variation in this group I have divided these studies into sub-groups. No less than a quarter of the articles have used the Decision Making in the European Union (DEU) data sets in the analysis (Thomson et al. 2006). The original DEU project started in 1998 and the research group collected data on 66 Commission proposals introduced or pending in 1999–2000. The data

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[21] One can, of course, question whether voting power studies really are *empirical* analyses like one of my selection criteria required. However, they use empirical observations (voting rules, number of players, number of votes etc.) as input data and, hence, I decided to include them.

collection was based on semi-structured interviews with EU decision-making experts, mostly civil servants working in member state representations, the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council Secretariat. The experts provided information on actor positions on the issues, the level of salience each actor attached to the issues, and estimates of actor capabilities (i.e. their power). Later this data was expanded to contain information on 125 legislative proposals that were introduced between 1996 and 2008 (Thomson et al. 2012).

TABLE 2. *Types of data used in selected articles.*

TYPE OF DATA	NUMBER OF ARTICLES	SHARE OF ARTICLES
DEU data	31	25 %
Official Council records	22	18 %
Voting power studies	18	15 %
Other quantitative data	16	13 %
Case studies	11	9 %
Qualitative interview data	9	7 %
Multiple data sources / No data	16	13 %
TOTAL	123	100 %

The main results of the original DEU project were presented in a special issue of *European Union Politics* (Stokman & Thomson 2004) and in the book *The European Union Decides* (Thomson et al. 2006). In addition, the DEU data have also been used in numerous articles and other publications and their influence for Council studies has been strong (Mattila 2012). Probably the best-known applications of these data are the various formal models used to explain negotiation dynamics in EU decision-making. The usefulness of the DEU data set is not, however, limited to these modelling applications. The same data have been used in numerous other studies, often with more empirically oriented starting points. As a result, the DEU data have increased our knowledge of the EU decision-making political space and coalition patterns (Kaeding & Selck 2005; Thomson 2009; Zimmer et al. 2005), member state success in Council negotiations (Bailer 2004; Golub 2012b; Selck & Kuipers 2005) and power of the Council presidency (Schalk et al. 2007; Thomson 2008; Warntjen 2008), to mention just a few studies. Furthermore, the DEU data have been used to explain member states' strategic negotiating positions (Bailer 2011), the role of salience in negotiations (Schneider et al. 2010) and possible 'vote selling' in the Council (Golub 2012a).

The second group of quantitative studies, with 18 % of the articles, uses official Council records as the data source. One often used source is the official Council voting records, i.e. formal votes cast by ministers at the last stage of Council decision-making process. In addition to describing the voting process and outcomes as such, these studies try to uncover the coalition structure of Council decision-making (i.e. member states that vote in a similar way) (e.g. Hagemann 2007; Hayes-Renshaw et al. 2006; Mattila & Lane 2001; Mattila 2009; Plechanovová 2011) or factors affecting the likelihood of

casting a negative vote in the Council (Hosli & Uriot 2011; Hosli et al. 2011; Mattila 2004). In general, these studies show that, while explicit voting in the Council is rare, when it happens some groups of member states tend to vote together more often than others (southern member states vs. northern, new vs. old member states).

The official records and data bases provide possibilities for other kinds of quantitative data collection as well. For example, studies have analysed the speed of decision-making, i.e. the length of time the legislative process takes from the introduction of a proposal to the final decision (e.g. Golub 1999) or how anticipation of approaching EU enlargements affects the total number of decisions made by the Council (Leuffen & Hertz 2010). Council records can also be used to assess how actively ministers actually take part in the legislative process and how changes in decision-making rules have affected this 'politicising' of the Council work (Häge 2008; Häge & Naurin 2013).

The 'Other quantitative data' category is a mixed group including studies using quantitative data not covered in other categories. The largest subgroup in this category is articles using data collected through surveys or in interviews with civil servants in the Council working groups at the preparatory stages of the legislative process. These studies examine, for example, communication flows among civil servants from various member states (Beyers & Dierickx 1997; Elgström et al. 2001), civil servants' socialisation to supranational norms (Beyers 2005) or their bargaining styles in negotiations (Naurin 2009; Panke 2010). There are also some articles that use quantitative data from content coding of textual material (Veen 2011) or even from computer simulations (Kollman 2003; Parízek 2012).

About 14 % of the articles belong to the category of 'Voting power studies'. These studies analyse member states' a priori voting power in the Council. As empirical material they use the number of votes each member state has, the number of member states and the threshold needed for a winning coalition. Some authors have also added empirical information about member state preferences to their calculations (Hosli 1999; Pajala & Widgrén 2004).

About 9 % of the articles belong to the 'Case study' category and about 7 % to the 'Qualitative interview data' category. Case studies typically employ various (usually qualitative) data sources such as official documents, historical data, interviews or participant observations. Articles in this category have, for example, highlighted how the ideological composition of national governments may affect Council negotiations (Leconte 2012; Miklin 2009). Strong themes in studies applying qualitative interview approach have been 'Europeanization' or 'supranationalization' of civil servants taking part in Council bargaining (Clark & Jones 2011; Lempp & Altenschmidt 2008) or their adherence to the prevailing social norms guiding everyday EU decision-making (Lewis 1998; Lewis 2005).

The last category in Table 2 includes articles that did not use any clearly defined data sets which made their inclusion in other categories impossible. Most of these articles were reviews of the existing Council studies (Hörl et al. 2005; Niemann & Mak 2010; Warntjen 2010) or were related to methodological questions on how empirical Council studies could be improved in the future (König 2005; Sullivan & Selck 2007).

Focus

Finally, Table 3 shows the main substantive focus of the articles. The categorisation was very difficult to do because in reality many, if not most, articles had multiple focuses and they could have been classified easily into other categories as well. Thus, the results in Table 3 should be seen only as a rather crude illustration of the variety of emphases and approaches contained in the articles.

TABLE 3. *Focus of selected articles.*

FOCUS	NUMBER OF ARTICLES	SHARE OF ARTICLES
Voting power	19	15 %
Bargaining strategies / success	16	13 %
Models	15	12 %
Dimensions/Coalitions	13	11 %
Presidency	12	10 %
Social norms	12	10 %
COREPER / Working groups	9	7 %
Council voting	7	6 %
Other	20	16 %
TOTAL	123	100 %

In terms of their focus, the largest group of articles (15 %) falls into the group of voting power studies. A good example of these studies is the article by Raunio and Wiberg (1998) who analysed how the (then) forthcoming enlargement of the Union affected member states' formal voting power in the Council. They considered how changes in voting rules and in the number of new member states would influence the distribution of power. Their article is also typical in the sense that voting power studies have been most popular during those periods when the EU has been undergoing major reforms (enlargements or treaty revisions). Since the 1990s and early 2000s, the number of voting power studies has declined as the pace of changes in the EU decision-making system has slowed down, although there are more recent examples of voting power studies as well (Kóczy 2012).

The next group of articles (13 %) includes studies that focus on member state bargaining in the Council, what kind of factors explain member states' chosen bargaining strategies and how member states have succeeded in their bargaining efforts. For example, Panke (2010; 2011) has studied what strategies are available to small states in Council negotiations. Several articles in this group have analysed how successful member states have been in attaining their goals in Council negotiations. According to the majority view there are no clear winners or losers among member states when a large number of decisions are analysed together (Arregui & Thomson 2009; Cross 2013) but there are also articles where this results is questioned (Golub 2012b).

The third category ("Models") with 12 % of the articles includes studies analysing EU's legislative process with game-theoretic and spatial rational choice models. I decided to form a separate category for these studies because they form a distinct and influential sub-group of Council studies. These models typically use the DEU data sets to predict the outcomes of Council negotiations under certain theoretical assumptions and then compare these predictions with the actual outcomes to see which model performs best. Many of these studies were published in a special issue of European Union Politics in 2004 (Stokman & Thomson 2004) but since that there have been many articles continuing this line of analysis (e.g. König & Proksch 2006; Schneider et al. 2010)

The "Dimensions/Coalitions" category contains articles that have examined member state similarities in their preference or voting patterns in the Council. Analysing similarities makes it possible to explore the political space of Council decision-making and to single out the most important dimensions structuring Council bargaining. As already mentioned, most studies have found geographical dimensions to be the most important dividing lines among member states. However, geographical patterns do not really constitute an explanation for coalition formation. A more substantive interpretation have been offered, for example, by Zimmer et al. (2005) who maintain that the main dimension dividing member states is redistributive, i.e. between those member states that are net-contributors to the EU budget and those who are net-receivers. Thomson (2009), on the other hand, argues that the two main dimensions are between those preferring less regulation vs. those preferring more and between those who prefer more and those who prefer less financial subsidies.

About 10 % of the articles have focused on the Council presidency. These studies have utilised both qualitative (Tallberg 2004) and quantitative (Schalk et al. 2007; Thomson 2008; Warntjen 2008) data and their general conclusions concur: the member state holding the presidency is able to use presidency to move final decision outcomes closer to its own preferences. Other studies in this group have, for example, focused on the effects of the rotating presidency (Batory & Puetter 2013; Kollman 2003).

Most of the articles in the next two groups ("Social norms" and "COREPER/ Working groups") focus on the every-day decision-making in the Council working groups or in the COREPER. The first group includes (often sociologically-flavoured) studies that examine how social norms guide negotiations in the Council and how civil servants are gradually socialized into these norms (e.g. Beyers & Trondal 2004; Elgström & Jönsson 2000; Lewis 2008). In the latter group, studies focus also on the Council work below the ministerial level but the approach is different. For example, Panke (2011) studied small state strategies in COREPER negotiations or Christiansen (2002) analysed Council secretariat's role in treaty preparations.

About six percent of the articles have focused directly on Council voting. Most of these studies are quantitative analyses of member state votes but recently voting has been focus of qualitative interview studies as well (Novak 2013). The rest of the articles are categorised in the "Other" group because they did not really fit into any other group. These include already mentioned review articles but also studies such as Wallace's (2002) examination of various Council images or Kreppel's (2013) study of the ideological composition of the Council in its various sub-formations.

Conclusion

Twenty years ago Hix (1994) called for researchers to adopt approaches and theories from comparative politics in analyses of EU decision-making. At least in the field of Council studies his call has been answered. Over the past two decades the field has matured and the Council has been increasingly conceptualised as an important part of EU's 'political system' which can be analysed with similar tools as national politics. The field has evidenced a rapid growth both in the number of studies and in the variety of approaches used by Council researchers.

In this chapter I have analysed the state of the research on the Council of the European Union through 123 Council related articles. Given the short space available the analysis has unavoidably been somewhat superficial. Nevertheless, I hope that I have been able to provide at least a reasonably fair overview on the various approaches, data sources and methodological choices used in the field.

Researchers have typically analysed the Council as a bargaining venue where member states fight over the substance of legislative proposals either on the ministerial level or on lower levels of preparation. Quantitative studies have numerically dominated the field with over half of the articles studied in this review applying some form of quantitative data. One should not, however, underestimate the effect of qualitative Council studies. While their amount is smaller than that of quantitative studies they feature prominently on the list of most cited Council articles.

Personally, based on this review and my own work in the field, I think that there are several areas in the field of Council studies that need more emphasis in the future. First, we know now quite a lot about what happens at the last stage of Council decision-making, that is, on the ministerial level. However, at the same time we know that a vast majority of the decisions are in practice already agreed on the preparatory levels below the ministers. Although, as seen earlier, there are several articles focusing on this stage of the legislative process, more research on national preference formation, bargaining strategies and possible preference changes during the preparatory process is needed. Second, the Council (in general) is still characteristically seen as a bargaining venue where member states advocate their national interests. However, the Council is a decision-making body for national governments, i.e. for those parties that happen to be in power in member states and who get to decide what the 'national interest' is. When these parties change, the political priorities and preferences are likely to change as well. Many of the Council studies overlook this ideological aspect of Council decision-making.

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